DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 549 CS 217 005

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TITLE	Can Your Students Spell Millennium?
PUB DATF	2000-00-00
NOTE	15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Nebraska State Reading Association (27th, Kearney, Nebraska, February 25, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Activities; *Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; *Spelling; *Spelling Instruction; Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS	Direct Instruction; Spelling Patterns

ABSTRACT

Spelling is a developmental process that fits naturally within the writing process. It is supported through quality phonics instruction and phonemic awareness activities, and requires the use of multiple modalities which students say, write, and look at words while they are learning to spell. There are ccmmon myths that are associated with spelling like "people who cannot spell are ignorant," and "spelling errors should not be tolerated". Teachers should make spelling part of the whole curriculum where expectations are based on each child's development, de-emphasizing correctedness, memorization, and writing mechanics. Spelling is a constructive developmental process in which patterns of stage progression are required. Invented spelling should be encouraged and celebrated, and teachers need to respond to children's writing in a written form to help them discover more about conventional writing. Spelling should be presented in a supportive and motivational manner, showing children how correct spelling is necessary to convey a message in print. (AA)

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Running Head: SPELLING INSTRUCTION

Can Your Students Spell Millennium?

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CS 217 005

Abstract

This paper was part of a presentation at the Nebraska State Reading Association's 27th Annual Conference in Kearney, Nebraska on February 25, 2000. The author's purpose was to blend current research, best practices, and classroom-tested procedures for quality spelling instruction. The audience included elementary classroom teachers, literacy specialists, Title I teachers, and building administrators all sharing a desire for quality spelling instruction in elementary schools.

Can Your Students Spell Millennium?

Spelling is a developmental process that fits naturally within the writing process. It is supported through quality phonics instruction and phonemic awareness activities. Spelling requires the use of multiple modalities...students say (aural), write (kinesthetic), and show or look at (visual) words while they are learning to spell.

Myths Impacting Spelling Instruction

J. Richard Gentry clearly explains and defuses the most common myths impacting spelling instruction today in his book, Spel...Is a Four-Letter Word. His common sense approach to spelling instruction is a must-read for all elementary teachers (1987, pp. 8-10).

Myth: Spelling is a serious business.

It is merely a convenience for communicating in written form. There are times one needs accuracy and spelling provides a means to ensure that.

Myth: Spelling is supposed to be difficult.

It can be challenging because the system that has to be learned is a complex one. Some people do learn to spell easily, but learning to spell takes time. Inventive spellers who spell spontaneously find spelling easier. It is more difficult when instruction is removed from the context of writing.

Myth: People who cannot spell are ignorant.

Throughout history there have been numerous scholars, leaders, eminent scientists, even presidents who were poor spellers. Andrew Jackson had a

reputation of being a pitiful speller and claimed, "It's a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word!" (as cited in Gentry,1987, p.8).

Myth: Spelling errors should not be tolerated.

Making spelling errors while learning to spell is natural. Errors should not only be tolerated, they should be expected. Invented spelling is one means of testing and modifying hypotheses about spelling. Regie Routman wrote that she does not "accept misspellings that occur because of carelessness, lack of teaching, or low expectations...We need to continue to celebrate children's invented spelling while keeping our expectations for students reasonable and high" (as cited in Hill, Ruptic, & Norwick, 1998, p.47).

Myth: Good teachers reduce marks for poor spelling.

Lowering grades for misspellings places unnecessary physical and psychological constraints on students writing a first draft. The emphasis should be on the content and not the writing during the draft stage. Teachers should focus on teaching proof reading skills during the editing stage and stress the value of correct spelling for the final draft.

Myth: Spelling is right or wrong.

Good teachers always correct spelling. Undue emphasis on correct spelling often impedes children's spelling development . Children at the early stages of spelling development should not be expected to spell like adults.

Myth: Good spellers memorize a lot of information. Spelling is a cognitive process and not a series of memorization tasks. Visual memory is required of effective spellers, although this is not a memorization task.

Myth: Good spellers master a lot of rules.

In actuality, good spellers master a few rules that work consistently. It is not effective use of time and effort to memorize rules that cannot be consistently applied.

Myth: To become good spellers, kids have to do hundreds of spelling book exercises and drills.

There is no documented evidence that ditto sheets, workbooks, and exercises create expert spellers. Free writing and word study is more efficient use of time.

Myth: The most important thing about spelling is making 100% on spelling tests.

The importance of spelling tests is overemphasized. Spelling requires more than memorizing a list of words each week. Formal spelling instruction needs a logical program of word study to be effective.

The Reality of Spelling Instruction

Spelling is a constructive developmental process. There are patterns and a progression of stages in early spelling development. Some children do have trouble with spelling. One cannot assume that all good readers and writers are also good spellers. It is not a measure of intelligence.

Children learn to spell by inventing spelling. When children invent spellings, they think about the words they want to write, they generate new hypotheses and knowledge about spelling. It makes them think and learn. Purposeful writing is a key to learning to spell. Invented spelling and writing with

a purpose are reciprocal ways to promote this learning. Purposeful writing unlocks children's thinking about spelling by engaging them in this process. Publishing or writing for an authentic purpose motivates children to write.

Developmental Stages

Spelling is a developmental process with observable stages (Gentry, 1987; Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Hill et al., 1998; Spelling Research and Information,1998). Although different labels are often given to these stages, the descriptions are quite similar.

Young writers begin at the precommunicative stage of spelling (Gentry & Gillet,1993). Other sources often divide this stage into two separate parts, pre-writing and pre-phonetic (Hill et al.,1998) to separate the scribble writing stage from writing made up of letter-like forms. During this stage, children produce these letter-like forms to represent their message. This message can only be read by the author immediately after it is written. There is no connection to the sound represented...just long strings of letters and letter-like forms.

The semiphonetic stage (Gentry & Gillet, 1993) demonstrates the growing awareness that letters reprsent sounds. There is an obvious awareness of phonemes. Initial consonants are used. Often a single letter name represents an entire word, like **R** for the word **are** or **U** for **you**. This telegraphic writing omits many major sounds in words.

The awareness that all words can be represented phonetically is demonstrated in the phonetic stage (Gentry & Gillet, 1993). The children literally

spell what they hear. There is a systematic concrete mapping of each letter to each sound. They are beginning to notice some common letter patterns.

The transitional stage (Gentry & Gillet, 1993) marks the beginning of using conventional patterns, i.e. each syllable has a vowel. Students spell words as they look, relying on their visual memory. Children begin to recognize alternative spellings of the same sounds.

The mature (Gentry & Gillet, 1993) or conventional (Hill et al., 1998) stage signals the completion of the developmental stages and readiness to begin direct spelling instruction. The children are ready to internalize visual patterns. These writers exhibit a growing accuracy in using silent consonants and irregular spellings.

Teaching Strategies and Procedures

From the beginning, teachers need to make spelling part of the whole curriculum. Students should write frequently and purposefully. Invented spelling should be encouraged and celebrated. Expectations should be based on each child's level of development, de-emphasizing correctness, memorization, and writing mechanics. Teachers need to respond to children's writing in a written form to will help them discover more about conventional spelling.

Formal instruction usually begins near the end of first grade or during second grade. Prior to children being developmentally ready for direct instruction, spelling should be taught and reinforced using teachable moments such as part of a writing conference or when responding in a journal format. Most children are at the transition level when direct instruction begins. Individual

and small group instruction continues to be appropriate. Writing conferences are ideal times for this type of instruction. Teach only a few consistent rules like the use of periods at the end of abbreviations or capital letters beginning proper nouns. Phonic instruction provides supplemental learning.

Conventional spellers need to internalize the complex systems through the use of phonetic, semantic, historical, and visual knowledge of words. The phonetic demand makes this a perfect match with phonics instruction. Semantic demand is used to make connections between words studied in spelling instruction. Vocabulary from history or literature lessons could be included when they contain the spelling pattern being studied. Studying the historical sources of words, or etymology, makes spelling instruction more interesting. An example of this would be explaining that the double consonants at the beginning of llama reflect its Spanish origin. Use of visual memory and knowledge of visual conformity support the visual demands of spelling instruction.

Expert spellers visualize words. They can see the misspellings, often saying they knew how to spell a word because it looked right. The visual coding mechanism is elusive and complex. It works parallel with other processing mechanisms. Giving students many opportunities to read and write helps to develop visual coding.

The basic lesson process, supported by current research, is simple and straightforward. Formal instruction should be scheduled for 60-75 minutes per week, or about 15 minutes daily. Words should be presented in a list or column form. This is not the time for a vocabulary lesson. The tried-and-true study

procedure of pretest, then study unknown words, and then post test is still the most effective method to use with children. Students should correct their own tests to help them develop visual memory and reinforce the importance of editing their own writing. Direct spelling instruction should include spelling strategies. Spelling games will motivate make lessons more enjoyable (Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Spelling Research and Information, 1998).

Choosing Spelling Words for Study

Basal word lists are based on word usage studies. There are about 5000 words that make up 90% of the words used in writing. Lists should include only the words children will use in their daily writing and those that occur frequently in what they are reading. When using these lists without the accompanying basal instruction, keep the lists at a level of comfortable challenge. An appropriate placement would be the level where the child can achieve 50-75% accuracy on a 20-word test prior to studying the list (Gentry & Gillet, 1993).

When developing word lists for students, group words by specific patterns. Children learn to spell pattern-by-pattern not word-by-word. Possible patterns include:

- sound and letter patterns, i.e. word families
- visual patterns, i.e. /ough/, /bb/, or /gg/
- semantic or meaning patterns, such as structural patterns (add s to make a word plural) and Greek or Latin roots.

Use words from content areas and stories when they fit the pattern being studied to give extra practice with the word and spelling. Spelling lists should also include commonly used words for review.

Research has deflated another spelling tradition. Word lists should be much shorter than the traditional 20 words plus a few challenge words. Teachers and parents are often frustrated when their children get perfect grades on their spelling tests and then do not spell the same words correctly in their writing. It is better to learn fewer words reliably. Primary grade students need four to six unknown words with a maximum of ten words. Intermediate and middle school children need six to ten unknown words with more for the expert spellers. The key word is "unknown" words. Students should not waste their time studying the words they already knew on the pretest, but individualize their lists by adding words they need to study, perhaps from their writing portfolios or word books (Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Spelling Research and Information, 1998).

Best Practices

One of the best practices, "Making Words", is cited in Best Practices in Literacy Instruction (1999) and was originally published by Pat and Jim Cunningham in an article published in The Reading Teacher (1992). The basic process includes giving each student the same packet of letters. Leading the students through a process of discovery, students create a long list of words from these letters. Children learn how changing and/or adding letters makes different words. They manipulate these letters to make 10-15 words including a secret word, which requires using all of the letters. After making individual words, these

words are sorted by patterns, i.e. rhyming words, initial blends, plurals. Children use phonic knowledge by using the rhyming words they created to decode other rhyming words. The secret word fits content area studies or has a letter pattern the teacher wants to introduce.

Another best practice described in Best Practices in Literacy Instruction, is "Using Words You Know" (1999, p.81-81). This activity begins with the teacher selecting three or four words the students can read and spell that have many rhyming words spelled with the same rime pattern. It is even more motivating to use brand names on packaging familiar to the students, i.e. Cool Whip (pool, stool and ship, tip). The students read and spell these words, becoming aware of other patterns for spelling the same sounds as well as developing their visual checking sense.

"Word Walls" can be used at all elementary grade levels (Wagstaff, 1997-98: Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, & Pressley, 1999). The simple form of a word wall would include many of the sight words, which the beginning readers are learning. The teacher should selectively limit the words to common words children use in their writing. Words are added gradually...about five words a week. The words should be assessable, at a level where everyone can see them and in large, clear print. For younger students colors can be used to signal constantly confused words, or word shapes outlined to give configuration clues. It is suggested using a variety of approaches to "doing the word wall" with chants and writing to help practice these words because struggling readers are not usually good visual learners and cannot just look at a word to remember it

(Gambrell et al., 1999, p.76-77). A variety of review activities are needed to provide enough practice so that the words are read and spelled instantly or automatically. Students are held accountable for the correct spelling any words on the word wall when writing.

"Word Sorts" are highly effective activities that most students think of as a spelling game or puzzle (Gambrell et al., 1999: Harris, Graham, Zutell, & Gentry, 1998). The action of sorting and categorizing words helps children identify visual and graphophonic relationships and patterns. There are closed sorts when the teacher gives the categories for sorting the words at first, such as using the first letter, common wounds, or letter patterns. Open sorts allow the children to study the words and discover relationships to make their own appropriate categories using both divergent and inductive thinking. Unusual attributes and spelling patterns are more meaningful when the students discover these and share their discoveries with their classmates.

Discussion

Spelling is an important part of the elementary school curriculum. Although it is discussed and reinforced throughout the school day, spelling still requires direct instruction once the students reach the transitional level in their spelling development. Spelling needs to be presented in a supportive and motivational manner, showing how correct spelling is necessary to convey a message in print. Authentic reading and writing tasks support this learning and provide practice. Current research findings and best practices help the teacher

provide spelling instruction and support in an effective manner within the classroom to all students.

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